



T E X A S ☆ T I M E S

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Leading the way, in capitals and capitols

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

The words “proud” and “Texan” go together quite easily. They describe many of us fortunate enough to call Texas home. The words may also spotlight what irritates those unlucky souls who don’t live here.

Texas is the only state that was once a nation. It’s the only state to enter the union by treaty, not annexation. “Houston” was the first word spoken by man as he set foot on the moon.

The most decorated soldier of World War II was a Texan: Audie Murphy. Two U.S. presidents were born in Texas, and two of the last three call it home. The Texas State Capitol fits our pride. The building sits on one of the highest points in Austin, and the top of its dome is nearly 15 feet taller than the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Built of “sunset red” granite quarried in Burnet County, this Texas landmark is also America’s largest state capitol in gross square footage.

But Austin is not by any means the only capital in Texas. Texans are great promoters. They enjoy being the biggest, the best, and at the center. Most of us know that Tyler is the rose capital of the world, and Houston is the oil capital. But other Texas cities can lay claim to distinction, less publicized to be sure.

Athens, Texas, calls itself the “Black-Eyed Pea Capital of the World.” In the early 1900s, a local businessman began planting the pea in quantity. A 1919 issue of *Farm and Ranch* magazine described the resulting scene: “The whole population of Athens, seemingly, and then some” was busily loading sacks of black-eyed peas onto wagons.

Several canning plants opened in the late 1930s. The “Home Folks” brand of black-eyed peas became one of the town’s largest businesses. The upscale retailer Neiman Marcus carried Home Folks’ pickled black-eyes as “Texas Caviar” as late as 1971.

Black-eyed pea fields aren’t as numerous today, but another Athens creation is going stronger than ever. The late Fletcher “Old Dave” Davis of Athens is credited with concocting the first hamburger in a little café in Athens a century ago.

Davis first offered it to the public at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. Of course, some non-Texans also claim to be father of the burger. But even researchers at McDonald’s “Hamburger University” have credited an “unknown food vendor” at the 1904 World’s Fair with this invention.

Just up the road from Athens, in the northeast Texas town of Commerce, another distinction has taken a new turn. Commerce, you see, is the official “Bois d’Arc Capital of the World.”

The Bois d’Arc is a native state tree that thrives in northeast Texas. Pronounced “BO-dark,” it’s also

known as the Osage Orange or Bois d’Arc Apple. Commerce sits in the middle of the tree’s prime growing area.

Native Indians and early Texas settlers used durable Bois d’Arc wood for bows and arrows, fence posts, rail ties, wagon wheels and tools. Later, during the Dust Bowl, Texas Bois d’Arc seedlings were shipped all across the Great Plains to create thousands of miles of “living fences.” The tree’s roots slow soil erosion and its branches provide badly needed shade.

The tree’s centerpiece in Commerce is “Max,” a 300-year-old giant Bois d’Arc listed as a “Famous and Historic Tree” by the American Forests organization. Each year, Commerce holds a festive “Bois d’Arc Bash” on the weekend closest to the date in September 1885 when the city was incorporated.

The Bois d’Arc Bash weekend is all about fun and civic pride. But it now appears the tree may provide yet another serious benefit. Researchers at Texas A&M University-Commerce recently published an article suggesting Bois d’Arc fruit may help combat several serious diseases.

The fruit contains high levels of isoflavones, a natural chemical that helps lower risk for heart disease and cancer. Unique Bois d’Arc isoflavones have been studied by other laboratories, and may also protect brain cells from a naturally occurring compound connected to the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.

As our Texas researchers continue their pursuit of knowledge on how Bois d’Arc isoflavones can protect human life, the rest of us will be backing them. We know they will pursue their ideas with energy and enthusiasm.

That’s part of the Texas tradition. The greatness of Texans continues to unfold throughout our state—in the spotlight and outside it—every day. I believe the pride we have in our neighbor’s achievements—not our own—is truly what defines the expression “proud Texan.”

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column